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# To Be Created Precedes Our Creativity

Abraham van de Beek

## 1. The Human Being as Subject in the Modern Age

Since the Renaissance it is customary to consider the creative human being as the true form of humanity. Philosophically this perception of the human being is in an extremely concentrated way expressed by René Descartes. For Descartes human reason is the exclusive starting point where we have certainty for the interpretation of reality. The human rational subject is the center of the universe. And not only the universe, even God is grasped by the rational subject.

Immanuel Kant has modified and sharpened the position of Descartes. When the reasoning human being constructs reality, this is not *the* reality but *human* reality. About reality itself (*das Ding an sich*) we can not say anything. We only know reality as we conceive it according to the categories of our mind. On the one hand this sharpened position of Kant means a limitation. More can exist than we think. At the same time, however, it means the end of ontology and metaphysics. Neither about the world nor about God can something reasonable be said. We only speak about the world in the manner of natural patterns which are functional to us, as Isaac Newton formulated them and James Watt applied them to practical benefit for human beings. We only speak about God in the manner of a useful postulate with regard to human conduct. According to Kant, theology deals with the God who is required for our acting, not with a God who really exists outside this world.

The philosophical concepts of Descartes and Kant are fundamental for the modern age. The human being is the mature subject which in freedom creates its own reality. For theology this position has far-reaching consequences. Many people have drawn the conclusion – although neither intended by Descartes nor by Kant – that believing in God has become impossible for modern people.<sup>1</sup> Other people, far

1. Descartes thinks it is reasonable to believe in God and he even maintains the arguments for the existence of God. Kant argues in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* that,



more congenial to Kant, have mainly centered the meaning of faith in ethics. What the word 'God' means is expressed in human acting.<sup>2</sup> This is expressed radically in the slogan "God has no hands than our hands." Other theologians speak more moderately about cooperation, though usually without indicating how the knowledge about God and God's acting is related to human acting.

Because the human being is the constituting ground, the human ultimately remains moving within its own closed circle. From the position of Descartes this leads to objectification and finally manipulation of everything that the human being creates around itself. Everything is merely object of the only true subject: the human self. From the position of Kant it leads to an ethical claim which can not be broken, formulated as the categorical imperative. There is no way to escape and there is no possibility for liberation from the outside. Both positions shape the face of modern society: power and guilt, immoderate boundlessness and infinite responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The Human Being within the Subjectivity of the Other One

In the twentieth century in both philosophy and theology voices have arisen which break through this self-centered perception of reality. In his phenomenological philosophy Edmund Husserl pleads for the primacy of reality over knowledge. Theologically, Karl Barth, with a great deal of verve, has defended the primacy of God and God's creative speaking over human thinking. God is not an object of our subjective creativity, but the subject which creates reality. We can not say that for Barth the human being consequently becomes an object, while God would be the single subject.

Secondarily, the human being is a subject as well. But it is a subject due to the creative Word of God. The human being is free in its free answer to the Word of God.<sup>4</sup> This freedom and therefore true subjectivity however only exists where the human being endorses

since human beings are morally acting and have a conscience, they at least *believe* that God will judge them.

2. Therefore the criterion for good theology is usually found in the ethical consequences of a doctrine, not in esthetics nor in ontology.

3. The position of Heidegger is characteristic. He resists against the primary human condition in which he considers everything (himself included) as an object ('*Zeug*'). In existentialism the human being has subsequently infinite personal responsibility. But the relation of Heidegger to the fascism of national-socialism is at least ambiguous. The existentialism of Sartre maintains personal responsibility to the end. But here anarchism dawns on the horizon.

4. See for instance *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III, 4, pp. 12ff.



God's speaking. The human being is subject in endorsing the Word of God, not in protesting against it. For in its protest it does not assent to its own real destination as given by God. In its protest, however, the human being does not shape its own creative subjectivity, but falls into not-being (*das Nichtige*). Only in endorsing the speaking of God the human being is truly human.

The subjectivity of God is guaranteed by Barth. Theologically one can formulate within his thought an anthropology that accords with this subjectivity of God. But it remains problematic how this *theologically designed* human being is related to the experiencing, acting and thinking human being.<sup>5</sup> Theologically no objection can be offered to the relation between God and human beings as is formulated by Barth. But it does not fit in with reality as people experience it, nor with reality as believing people experience it. Again and again in the Barthian systematic theology the human being must be called on to renounce the facts and to pay attention to the Word which creates the true reality. Therefore Barth actually gets bogged down in idealism<sup>6</sup> and – perhaps only seemingly<sup>7</sup> – renounces the experiencing human being. The formulated truth precedes reality. The proposition that this very formulated reality as the reality of the Word is the true reality, does not detract from the idealistic character of Barth's theology. For every form of idealism since Plato claims the world of ideas to be the true reality and takes the view that experienced reality bears the features of not-being. So Barth saves theology from the hands of manipulating human beings and from the collapse of metaphysics by putting the Word first and foremost, but he does so at the cost of the loss of experience. The God of whom he is speaking is not the God of the world that we experience and in which we live, but the God of a theological world which is only valid within the limits of the Word.

Just as radically as by Barth the opposition to the self-centeredness of the modern age is conducted by Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas also starts with the other one, but now not with the totally other

5. This problem is comprehensively discussed by Hendrikus Berkhof, *200 Jahre Theologie. Ein Reisebericht* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985) 205-226.

6. See B. Rothen, *Die Klarheit der Schrift. Karl Barth: eine Kritik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), especially pp. 66ff and 186f. Barth's theology is '*spekulative Theologie*', because his thought starts from a *concept* (*Begriff*, p. 67). Though this speculation is a broken one, at last the unifying tendency of Barth's theology is predominant. Barth is inclined "die Vielfalt des geschöpflichen Lebens unter einen *vereinheitlichenden* Gesichtspunkt zu stellen" (p. 186).

7. On the one hand Barth is very influenced by political occurrences and on the other hand one can remark especially in his *Einführung in die evangelische Theologie* (Zürich, 1962) that according to him a good theologian is personally totally involved in his theological work.



God but with the other human being. Not I myself am the subject which creates reality but the other one who calls on me. The human face of the other precedes my acting. In this human face of the other God's calling comes to me, because this call is an absolute one with which we can not play around. The other one calls on me. In the endorsement of that call I come to act in his name in a substitutional position.<sup>8</sup> Although the cogent call of the other one is relativized by the presence of the third one, nevertheless for myself the call of the other one remains also when it has become the call of the others.

With Levinas the problem that experience and theological reality are separated does not exist. The encounter with the other one is a real experience. From another point of view, however, Levinas totally stays in the Kantian tradition: the call of the other one is a moral call. The imperative now comes to us by the other human being, but it remains an imperative. Especially through the category of substitution we again and finally end up with our own personal responsibility. The other one is not a gift to me but a demand on me. Due to the absoluteness of the moral demand there is no room for other experiences, feelings of resistance, aesthetics or the enjoyment of my own life. Everything is subordinated to the absolute other who precisely in the absolute call is a symbol of God.

So in another way than with Barth the complexity of experienced reality is done away by a theological model. However much Levinas resists idealism, finally his thought turns out to lead to a very radical form of idealism: the other one is the personalization of the idea of the good. In the final analysis, this not only leads to the denial of all the remaining experience as good and significant experience, but to idolatry as well. There is no relativization of the face of the other when God, through this human face and exclusively through this face, speaks to us.

### 3. Subject of a Passive Sentence

The problem with Descartes is that for him the human being is the only real subject and God becomes an object of our reason. Accordingly Kant was right to conclude, that in this way God can not be God. But with Kant himself God is nothing else than a functional

8. E. Levinas, "La Substitution," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 66 (1968) 487-508. The meaning of 'substitution' is for Levinas quite different from that in traditional Christian theology. For Levinas it does not mean that somebody else bears substitutionally my guilt, but that I myself am called on to bear the burden of the other's life. It is 'unlimited responsibility' (p. 507).



condition for human acting. God is an idea which is isolated from experience and thinking. This God can not be God as well. Barth rightly goes the other way around. God is not an object of our reason nor a function of our morals, but God precedes our thinking and acting. It is not our creativity which shapes God, but it is the creating God by whom we can exist.

Theologically, Barth's position is very attractive: he starts with God. God is the creative subject and nothing precedes Him. Nevertheless in analyzing Barth's theology an enduring feeling of uneasiness continues to disturb us. This uneasiness is unanimously expressed both by liberals and pietists: the theology of Barth is isolated from experience, not only from physical experience, but especially from religious experience. The subjective creativity of God is so great that our own subjectivity is absorbed by it. The consequence is that some Barthians only speak about the reality of the Word and theologically deny the experienced human reality, whereby the gnostical dualism is at hand, and other Barthians call on the human being to conform the whole of reality to God's true reality, by which they end up with the moral idealism of Kant.

Levinas, it is true, solves the problem of experience by seeing God in the face of the other one, but he is one-sidedly fixed on the moral call to such an extent that God is removed from the rest of experience. Moreover, the religious distance of the ineffable Name of Israel's God is not maintained.

If we want to speak theologically about God, it is out of the question that God would merely be an idea that we create. We can not start with the human being as a reasoning and acting subject. Therefore, Descartes and Kant are not up to the standard of theology. But we can not speak about the human being as an object either like God. The human being is not a thing. Consequently we can do as Barth and Levinas, i.e., propose that we consider the human subject as created by the other One. Our subjectivity is a responding or even subjected subjectivity. Because the other One is calling on us for an answer inevitably our subjectivity comes in the sphere of ethics. Human subjectivity for both Barth and Levinas implies that there is no proper human creativity in being a subject: only in so far as one responds or is subjected to the call of the Other, one is a true human being. With Barth the human being becomes an active subject in acting according to the call which came to him he himself; so grammatically the person becomes the subject of an active sentence.<sup>9</sup> Levinas

9. *KD* IV, 3, p. 639: "Es muß ... geboten sein, nach dem *einen* Ziel der Berufung *aller* Christen zu fragen: nach dem Gesetz der Freiheit, dem sie alle, jeder in seiner Besonderheit, sind sie wirklich Christen, nicht widersprechen, sondern entsprechen werden."



maintains a passivity until the end, the subject is sub-jected to all being.<sup>10</sup>

Reflecting on the grammatical functions in a sentence it seems possible to make theological progress. In the usual view of the modern age regarding human beings, they are the subject of an active sentence. Especially with Descartes all other people and things, and God as well, become the object of an active sentence. With Barth and Levinas God and human beings regain their subjectivity. They even become the pre-eminent active subject. As far as human beings answer the call of this subject, they themselves also become a subject. With Barth this subject is an active subject, acting in obedience, directed to an object of their acting.

Theological discussions in the modern age seem to be fixed on the active transitive sentence whereby the alternative is either an active subject or an object. What does not fit in with this scheme must be denied. There, however, exists a third possibility, between the active subject and the object: the subject of a passive sentence. It is precisely that position which is pre-eminently the position of human beings: we are created; we are called on. In this way we experience our reality. In this way we experience the other human being and God. So in contrast to the Cartesian model the subjectivity of God and of the human being are fully guaranteed. But our subjectivity does not only start with the response to the call of the other one, as Levinas suggests – in “a passivity more passive than any passivity.”<sup>11</sup> It starts with a large field of experiences of the reality which comes to us: in the experience of the other one, in the experience of God, in the experience of nature, in the experience of art.<sup>12</sup>

First of all human beings are experiencing and thus passive beings. Reality comes to meet them. It is given to them. Contrary to Descartes' idea of active constructing people we find the thought of Blaise Pascal. We have to do with receptive human beings who do not construct reality with their mathematical mind (*esprit de géomé-*

10. “La Substitution,” p. 500.

11. Ibid.

12. The difference between Levinas' position and mine is that for Levinas every distinction between the Self and the Other is denied (p. 500). Responsible human beings are not-being (p. 502). So the human can not be the subject of a sentence at all. The substitution “is the ex-ceptional which can not serve as a grammatical category” (p. 502).

I myself maintain the difference of persons and thus reciprocity and the possibility of a secondary objectivation, since a human being mediates to the other both itself as given to itself and various experiences that are given to it and thus he becomes a mirror to the other one as well.

Moreover, I would not focus everything on ethics. These differences and multi-colored human faculties are the reality of life. This is the only way life has enough relaxation in order to be able to exist and not to lapse into not-being.



*trie*), but who with their spirit of sensitivity (*esprit de finesse*) carefully listen to the experiences which come to them.<sup>13</sup> For Pascal data are really given in the most literal sense of the word. Therefore an all-embracing scheme of reality is impossible: we only receive a part of the richness of reality as a gift granted to us by grace. Therefore Pascal considers science to be a very tentative activity. Like Karl Popper he considers scientific propositions as very provisional models which at any moment can be overtaken by new experiences. This applies to the sciences, it applies to theology even more. God is the God who is revealed in history: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not the God of philosophical speculation. This God is given to us in the experience of the Fire and is found along the ways of the gospel,<sup>14</sup> which is an historical document.

#### 4. Being Precedes Consciousness

When theologically experience has primacy, do not the classic objections against a theology of experience then become relevant? How can we avoid the quicksand of religious sentiments? How can we evade the illusion of religious projections?

Precisely on this point the grammatical structure of the passive sentence gives clarification. For the experience of the passive subject presupposes the subject of a preceding active sentence. We can not start with the primary subject. If we would do so, it would mean that we could climb up to heaven. But in the experience in which something is granted to us, it is presupposed that it is handed over to us. If we experience another person, this person is met *by us*, but even in this encounter *the other one* is present as one who reveals itself unto us. We not only receive a gift handed over by the other one, but we are also granted something of the other person itself. So religious experience is not a perception of an active projecting mind, but of a passive experiencing subject who perceives that the other One comes as a gift. God gives God to us. God reveals God to us.

In the meantime the other person, even when it gives itself to us, is never cancelled out by giving itself. It remains the other one and is always more than its gift. So it continues to be an inexhaustible source of new encounters, of new gifts, of new grace. If the other one could give itself away totally, without any restriction, it would cease to exist and so could never again be a new source of surprising en-

13. *Pensées*, d'après l'édition de M. Brunschvicg (London: Dent; Paris: Crès, 1913) 1.

14. See Pascal's *Mémorial* (*Œuvres Complètes*, ed. J. Chevallier; Paris: Gallimard, 1954) 554.



counter. Exactly in the saving of the subject of the other one in revealing itself to us the richness of a surprising future remains open.

Religiously we can never reverse the primacy of the passive subject. We can not take the place of God. In the experience of the revelation we experience that God reveals the Divine. But it is *God* who is the subject of the act of revelation. Therefore, projection can never substitute the experience of God's presence, because in the projection the sequence of active and passive is reversed. Hence it is also impossible that we would be able grasp the whole truth. Then God would be extradited in such a way that God loses its own being. Then we can no longer be addressed by God and God is no longer God, but we have God at our disposal in order to wield power.

The problem of projection arises from a reversal of the sequence of being and consciousness. In projection the (sub)consciousness of what we need precedes the reality that is created by it. So the (sub)consciousness becomes the creative source of reality. Human development however goes the other way around. Human consciousness follows human being. Human life begins with the mere passive. The person is generated and in one and the same act conceived. *Parents* are the active subjects who grant life. And to the parents the child is a gift which exceeds their act by far. A human being is conceived and generated. It is born and is breast fed and nourished. It is well cared-for. So human world-experience develops as an experience of gifts from other persons. In this way also the person's religious experience arises: by the stories of the Scriptures, by the words of parents and teachers, by the symbols which human lives become. Through one's own recognition of this God in the Fire or in the sweet silence, in the encouragement or in the guilt, the person's religious symbolic universe develops. Even in order to grasp the meaning of projection it is necessary that authentic religious experience precedes.

Reality precedes our consciousness. Our self-consciousness follows our being. Here we come to the field of language of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher also considers reason and the active human subject as insufficient for belief. He bases this on a feeling of absolute dependence (*schlechthiniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*).<sup>15</sup> So also for Schleiermacher the human being is primarily dependent and passive. Nevertheless Schleiermacher's position is different from mine. For Schleiermacher the dependence is a recognition of the absolute self-consciousness. In this very absoluteness experience is excluded. It is far more an ontological *condition humaine*. Experiences are at most

15. F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1960; reprint from the 2nd edition) § 4.



secondary occurrences on this absolute, and therefore unrelated and so unrelativizable reality. This absolute primordial condition is without history and experience. Herein lies the basic difference with my position: our dependence is one of history and experiences in which God, in which human beings, in which the whole of reality continues to grant us new data and to reveal itself in surprising ways to us.

The primacy of the passive subject remains even when we shift to acting. Human beings come to activity. They also come to activity through their faith. They set out to work with their gifts. But in the spirit of sensitivity they recognize their acts to be gifts as well. It is a gift that I can act, just as it is a gift that I live. It is a gift that I can do good to other people. Augustine wrote: "When you crown your works, you crown nothing but your gifts."<sup>16</sup> Good deeds of human beings are not their own merit but a gift. It is a gift to experience that somewhere the vicious circle of guilt and powerlessness is broken and we may do an act of love.<sup>17</sup> And then we quickly repeat the words of the prophet: "For you also have wrought all our works in us" (Isaiah 26:12).

With this the active subject is not denied. It is precisely the enjoyment to be able to be active that is expressed. Denied is that human activity would be an absolute, autonomous fact and that the human being itself would create reality. Human activity exists by the grace of being and by the grace of the reality one acts in. The nature of one's acting exists by the grace of preceding experiences.

## 5. A Symbolic Universe

We noted that with Levinas experience is of essential importance. This experience however is focussed on the single face of the other one. Therefore it gets a religious absoluteness whereby all other experiences fade away into the background and whereby at last the holiness of God comes into question. When we now speak about experiences we refer to the whole field of experiences we undergo. Experiences shape our lives. In these experiences the reality which surrounds us provides us with signs of itself. They are not the whole of reality. They are only symbols which point to this reality. But they are not arbitrary symbols. They bear in themselves something of the reality which grants them. When another human being meets us, we get to know that person in some respect. The person is not com-

16. *Epistola* 194, 5, 19.

17. Compare the Dutch Confession, Art. 24: "We are far more indebted to God for the good works we do, and not He to us."



pletely revealed to us.<sup>18</sup> But what we experience nevertheless expresses something of this person. When God is revealed to us, the whole richness of the divine being is never delivered up to us. All the books of the world would be inadequate to articulate that mystery. Nevertheless we receive words and acts which enable us to know God – in such a way that we receive therein true life and salvation.

We do not dispose of the whole of reality, neither of the world, nor of God. We experience symbols that say something about them. Through those symbols a symbolic universe comes into being before us. With 'a symbolic universe' is meant the whole of experiences and thought that shape our perception of reality and form the possibility to express ourselves. We experience and act within this symbolic universe. By new impressions the symbolic universe is enriched. To this symbolic universe belong experiences of nature, experiences with people, but also stories and writings which are spoken to us. To this belong the songs we sing and the art which has an appeal for us. To this belongs the moral call which the other makes on us and the smell through which he is attractive or repulsive to us. To this symbolic universe belong the intimate experience of God's proximity and the perception that people can evoke religious hallucinations by means of drugs.

The symbolic universe is not the whole of reality. It is reality as it appears to us in symbols and is perceived. Nevertheless, it is shaped by expressions of true reality that we learn to know by them. The more receptive we are for experiences, the richer our universe and the more we discover about the reality of God and world.

Characteristic of the symbolic universe is its fragmentary nature. This not only means that we can not know everything, it also means that we can not comprehend all coherences and interrelations. The symbols can not be well ordered. Sometimes we see some coherence between two experiences or between experiences and thought. But from another perspective the coherence fades away. Sometimes experiences of suffering turn out to be a source of salvation and something of God's grace lights up in them. But from an other point of view and in relation to other symbols God's ways seem to be completely obscure and we even are inclined to say: "There is no God."

In the symbolic universe on which the Christian theologian reflects, the Bible has an important place. This, however, is not a book with univocal truths which is at our disposal. The Scripture itself is full of symbols of God's presence. In that way it is revelation

18. Therefore, a theistic personal concept of God is far more adequate to express the incomprehensibility of God than Tillich's idea of 'God beyond God', which is only a rational, and thus well defined, concept.



of God. And the symbols of the Scripture in which God is revealed prove again and again to be richer than we knew before. Therefore we read the Scripture from cover to cover. And after having read and reread it, even the most well known verse turns out to be able to speak in a new and astonishing way. By reading the strange Word of God with an open mind we are showered with gifts from God that enrich our symbolic universe, which is the world in which we live and act. With such an open mind we can be in the world, nature, history and face other people.

Because of the openness of our symbolic universe and the impossibility of making everything univocal every claim for absoluteness is excluded.<sup>19</sup> Nowhere can we find a symbol which coincides with God. Never can we fix an other human being in the fragmentary experiences we have had with that person up to now. A human being always is greater than my symbol for that person, even when it is a complex of symbols corresponding to the complex and often conflicting nature of a human being.

We have to guard against religious claims of absoluteness far more. Theology and philosophy always are inclined to connect the word 'God' with the absolute, with the one, with the unrelativizable. It is precisely this wherein lies the problem of modern theology: God is absolute reason, absolute morality, absolute feeling. So we meet only an idol and not the living God. Even when it is said that God is 'beyond' because God is absolute, this 'beyondness' becomes an idol, no longer related with personal experiences but only an other word for the neutral absolute.

God always exceeds the symbol we find, even the symbol of the philosophical absolute, and appears in human finite experience. In that way God is greater than the 'Deus semper maior'. God is also greater than the human face and greater than the categorical imperative. God is greater than the guarantor of our knowledge and greater than the Bible. Even all our symbols and experiences are inadequate to comprehend God. We even do not always know in which way different experiences are related to God. Was our experience according to God's will or was it the opposite of it? Or was it perhaps both from a different point of view? Nevertheless God reveals God in the world. God bestows God's proximity by which we learn to know God in God's gifts. God calls us – who are little human beings, who have received everything, even ourselves, as a grateful gift from the

19. On this subject see my article, "Het Nederlandse van de Nederlandse theologie," in S. C. Dik & G. W. Muller, eds., *Het hemd is nader dan de rok. Zes voordrachten over het eigene van de Nederlandse cultuur* (Publikaties van de Commissie Geesteswetenschappen van de KNAW 1; Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1992) 108-120.



richness of God and the world. Sometimes we are completely embarrassed by it. But again and again God's gifts appear. Our symbolic universe continues to be enriched. Our lives continue to be more abundant. For every symbol sets us thinking – even the symbol which appears *sub contraria specie* as Luther says: where God seems to be absent, we are set thinking about God again. Who is this God who is the God of the secular world of modern people, and who at the same time appeals so measureless to human beings, even to modern human beings!

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